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STEELE AND THE SENTIMENTAL COMEDY

by
M. E. HARE

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STEELE AND THE SENTIMENTAL COMEDY

THERE is an essay of Goldsmith's, on the theatrical productions of his time, which a writer on the Sentimental Comedy would like to quote *in extenso*. And for this reason—that this kind of comedy, which Goldsmith described with great humour but with perfect justice in the piece in question, is a thing exceedingly difficult to define. Perhaps it is too near to us. We know it too well to be able to define it. Every one can recognize it at a glance. If you dip into a play written after 1710 or so, and find such a passage as this :—

Oh, my child ! my child ! [*Embraces her, and a comic servant or trusted butler sheds manly tears.*]

Child. All-gracious Heaven ! is it possible ! Do I embrace my father ?

you will know without the need of any definition that you have struck a genuine spring of that dolorous fountain of sham tears and sham wit—*La Comédie Larmoyante*, The Comedy of Sighs (that shall be changed to cries of joy in the Fifth Act), the subject of our essay—The Sentimental Comedy invented by the great essayist Sir Richard Steele.

This is how Goldsmith describes it. He has just cited the practice of the ancients in making tragedy deal with the misfortunes of the great and comedy with the humours of low life ; tragedy and comedy were never in the best classical times mixed to make what Voltaire calls a 'tradesman's tragedy' :—

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Yet notwithstanding this weight of authority, and the universal practice of all ages, a new species of dramatic composition has been introduced under the name of the Sentimental Comedy, in which the virtues of private life are exhibited rather than the vices exposed; and the distresses rather than the faults of mankind make our interest in the piece.

These comedies have had of late great success, perhaps from their novelty; and also from their flattering every man in his favourite foible. In these plays almost all the characters are good, and exceedingly generous; they are lavish enough of their tin money on the stage; and—though they want humour—have abundance of sentiment and feeling. If they happen to have faults and foibles the spectator is taught not only to pardon but to applaud them, in consideration of the goodness of their hearts; so that Folly, instead of being ridiculed, is commended; and the comedy aims at touching our passions without the power of being truly pathetic.

Goldsmith's arguments to prove that the Sentimental Comedy is an undesirable form of entertainment are by no means so good as his description. Omitting them, we come to the peroration of his essay, of which the following is a short passage:—

But there is one argument in favour of Sentimental Comedy which will keep it on the stage, in spite of all that can be said against it. It is of all others the most easily written. Those abilities that can hammer out a novel are fully sufficient for the production of a Sentimental Comedy. It is only sufficient to raise the characters a little, to deck out the hero with a riband, or give the heroine a title; then, to put an insipid dialogue without character or humour into their mouths, give them mighty good hearts and very fine clothes, furnish a new set of scenes, make a pathetic scene or two with a sprinkling of tender melancholy conversation through the whole; and there is no doubt but that all the ladies will cry and all the gentlemen applaud.

There we have the whole thing described—a humourless, sententious, lachrymose flattery of human nature—lights down, ‘nothing low,’ a gentle melancholy; love the only dramatic pivot; a comedy of lay curates and hysterical lay-curate worshippers; Tupper and tinsel.

Of course the English drama, which sixty years before had sparkled with the wit of the ‘Restoration Dramatists’ (as they are usually called), and had been as free from sentimentality as Miss Vivie Warren, did not arrive at this pitch of dull absurdity all at once. Yet it is quite astonishing with how rapid a sweep the dramatic pendulum, if one may be permitted the metaphor, swung across from the drama of brilliant heartlessness to the drama of insipid heart-on-the-sleeve.

This is, in brief, the history of the change. In the year 1698 the celebrated Jeremy Collier, disgusted at the licence of the theatre, ‘convinced that nothing had gone further in debauching the age than the stage poets and the play-house, thought’ (as he says) ‘that he could not employ his time better than by writing against them.’ He did this in his *Short View of the Immorality and Profaneness of the English Stage*. This tremendous piece of invective, impaired, as Professor Ward says, ‘neither by intemperance of language nor by any other symptom of inferior breeding,’ was irresistible. The Restoration comedy, with all its wild indecency, had been a natural and perhaps even a salutary reaction against the Puritanism which raged in the time of Cromwell. But a reaction, if carried too far, will cause another reaction tending in the direction of the original movement—a counter-reaction. And this had undoubtedly set in when Collier wrote his *Short View*. Expressions of sympathy and approval reached him from many quarters; even King William caused a *nolle prosequi* to be entered,

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thus relieving the Nonjuror from all further fear of proceedings against him as a political offender. Though the comic poets were championed by their ablest men—by Dennis, by Vanbrugh, by Dryden, and by Congreve—resistance was worse than useless. They had a bad cause to plead, and had at no time been quite unconscious of their offence. The counter-reaction had set in hard against them. A habit of morality soon became ‘the only wear’; writers like Mrs. Centlivre became anxious to reclaim their sinners in the last act; and in 1701 the essayist Steele, ever the champion of decency and morality, put a play upon the stage, in point of morals ‘no improper entertainment’ to be presented by the author of *The Christian Hero* to a ‘Christian commonwealth,’ as he calls our country in the preface to a later play. This was *The Funeral, or Grief a la mode*, written mainly in what one would like to call Steele’s ‘purely amusing’ as opposed to his ‘didactic’ style. It was dedicated to Isabella Countess of Albemarle, with a characteristic eulogy of the Countess’s virtues as a wife. A boisterous prologue, addressed mainly to Steele’s soldier friends (for our author had in 1694 enlisted in the Duke of Ormonde’s regiment of Guards), concluded with the lines :—

He knows he’s numerous friends; nay, knows they’ll
show it,
And for the fellow-soldier save the poet.

This was fittingly spoken by the eloquent Wilkes, and the play proved a striking success. It has an engaging freshness about it, characteristic of Steele’s best dramatic work—a kind of boyish good spirits. Even in the prologue this is seen. Speaking of the animal and acrobatic shows which were at the time in serious rivalry with the theatre, the prologizer said :—

Gorged with intemperate meals while here you sit,
You well may take activity for wit.

As our paper is on Steele the dramatist, and not merely on the Sentimental Comedy, a short account must be given of this and all his plays; but the position of Steele in dramatic history is a curious paradox. His best plays are his least important, and his worst are carefully read by the student because they so certainly represent the beginnings of that decline of our comic drama which led eventually to such a comedy as is exhibited in the *Heir at Law* when the rather overrated Dr. Pangloss is not on the stage; to Honest Kenrick, the comic Irishman, who is so affected by his mistress's doleful condition that he bursts into tears with the sensibility of a fine nature and cries 'boo-hoo'; in fine, to a very 'Turveydrop'-ism of sentimentality. A distinction has been drawn between Steele's two styles, his purely amusing and his didactic veins. The didactic was sentimental and often absurd; but the purely amusing is irresistibly lighthearted and merry. His first play, *The Funeral*, is for the most part in the latter style. It was written, he tells us, to clear his character from a kind of suspicion under which it had fallen upon the publication of *The Christian Hero*. This book was considered an offence against regimental good form, so that 'from being reckoned no undelightful companion' our author, in his own words, 'was soon reckoned a disagreeable fellow.' They found him guilty of an uncomfortable and unseasonable piety, and felt strongly that this was a quality a soldier could dispense with. *The Funeral* rehabilitated his lost character. It has passages of quite delightful comedy, though, like all Steele's dramatic work, it is, on the whole, an undoubted farce. It is very little didactic till the last Act. It is badly sentimental in places, but

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cannot be called Sentimental Comedy proper. Here is the plot of it :—

Lord Brumpton, an elderly nobleman married to a young and beautiful wife, is supposed to be dead. Really he has had some fit or swoon, and his body-servant Trusty (one of the earliest examples of this well-worn character on the English stage) discovers that he is alive and apparently none the worse. All this we learn from a conversation of master and servant in the first act.

Trusty is anxious for his master to improve the occasion by concealing the fact of his recovery, so that he may watch the conduct of his supposedly bereaved wife—a course which Lord Brumpton adopts, with some misgivings, upon Trusty's earnest representations that it is justified by the lady's entirely hypocritical conduct towards her husband. She has, it appears, only pretended affection for him. She will rejoice at his death. For the rest of the play, the action of which takes place within twenty-four hours, Lord Brumpton remains in concealment and observes the Lady Brumpton's conduct. She fully justifies his worst forebodings. She is wild with delight at his death. Observe the presence of the Congreve spirit of unreality, so ably explained by Charles Lamb and so ridiculously attacked by Hazlitt and Mr. George Meredith,—her delight does not shock us in the least. It is made the occasion for very lighthearted comedy. She rehearses to her maid, Mistress Tattleaid, all the villainies of her past (with her husband, of course, behind the arras); tells how she had led him into disinheriting his son by a former marriage; how delighted she is that her husband is really dead at last; how charming it will be to wear becoming black, and, after a year's seemly grief and retirement (ha! ha!), what an entrance she will make at the playhouse, how every one will run after the rich

and beautiful young widow ; finally, how clever she has been to secure the guardianship of two wards of her husband's—the ladies Sharlot and Harriot. The sub-plot is concerned with the loves of these ladies, who are kept locked up by the villainous widow—her wickedness is so tremendous as thoroughly to endear her to us (no one blames Punch for beating his wife)—in order that they may not marry before she has stolen their portions. Two faithful swains in love with Sharlot and Harriot—one the disinherited son (strange how these coincidences come about !), the other a friend of his, a Mr. Campley—contrive eventually to rescue the ladies, getting Sharlot out of the house dramatically enough, but without a great appearance of ‘probability,’ in Lord Brumpton’s unoccupied coffin at the end of the play. Prolonged applause. Lord Brumpton enters and blesses the lovers, taking his son to his heart with great fervour. Finally, the widow herself—exposed sufficiently before—is proved to have been married to a penniless scoundrel, one Cabinet, at some period anterior to her marriage with Lord Brumpton. She had married the nobleman to support her real husband (Cabinet) on whatever she could wheedle out of her pretended husband. This state of affairs—intolerably forced as it is made to appear, for the audience have had no hint of it beforehand—is introduced to enable Lord Brumpton to revoke a will made at his pretended wife’s instigation wholly in her favour, which left not a penny to his disinherited son, the Lord Hardy. Apparently Steele thought that while she continued to be his wife he could not write another will. Steele’s legal knowledge was confined to the province of actions for debt. However, Lady Brumpton was not a desirable wife, and this exposure of a former marriage effects a complete riddance of her. For, hurling at the despicable Cabinet an accusation of voluntary

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cuckoldom, she flings out and the good characters heave a sigh of relief.

All is now happiness, extremely indifferent blank verse, and songs set by Mr. Daniel Purcell. After the songs Lord Brumpton—taking, we may suppose, the centre of the stage—makes a short speech, half of it in blank verse, in a vein of gentle homily, and the curtain falls.

This conclusion was, it appears, not sufficiently tedious to spoil the reception of the piece, which is till the conclusion fresh and sprightly, delightfully innocent, and abounding in a kind of easy wit.

Steele had a good sense of character, and he was of course original in his treatment of the women in the piece. The ladies Sharlot and Harriot are real women, high-spirited and frank, with a modesty that is not prudery : with such agreeable feminine weaknesses as a shy confidence in their own good looks, not insisted on to the extent of colouring the whole character but just sufficiently sketched in to give a sense of life and reality. Then the undertaker, Mr. Sable, is an original and most amusing person. He has not been mentioned before—he has very little connexion with the plot. Here is a passage in which he is marshalling his mutes for a funeral:—

Sable. Well, come, you that are to be mourners in this house, put on your sad looks, and walk by me that I may sort you. Ha, you ! a little more upon the dismal [*forming their countenances*] ; this fellow has a good mortal look—place him near the corpse. That wainscot face must be a'top of the stairs ; that fellow's almost in a fright (that looks as if he were full of some strange misery) at the entrance of the hall—so—but I'll fix you all myself. Let's have no laughing now on any provocation [*makes faces*]. Look yonder, that hale, well-looking puppy ! You ungrateful scoundrel, did not I pity you, take you out of a great

man's service, and show you the pleasure of receiving wages? Did not I give you ten, then fifteen, now twenty shillings a week, to be sorrowful? and the more I give you, I think, the gladder you are.

And again, to Mistress Goody Trash :—

I wonder, Goody Trash, you could not be more punctual, when I told you I wanted you, and your two daughters, to be three virgins to-night to stand in white about my Lady Katherine Grissel's body; and you know you were privately to bring her home from the man-midwife's, where she died in childbirth, to be buried like a maid; but there is nothing minded. Well, I have put off that till to-morrow; go and get your bag of brick-dust and your whiting.

And later, to the mutes :—

Who can see such an horrid ugly phiz as that fellow's and not be shocked, offended, and killed of all joy while he beholds it? But we must not loiter.—Ye stupid rogues, whom I have picked out of all the rubbish of mankind, and fed for your eminent worthlessness, attend, and know that I speak you this moment stiff and immutable to all sense of noise, mirth, or laughter. [*Makes mouths at them as they pass by him to bring them to a constant countenance.*] So, they are pretty well—pretty well.

There is a very good scene where the widow cannot preserve the appearance of distracted grief which she has assumed, because some ladies who have called to sympathize with her will talk the most fascinating scandal in an undertone to one another :—

[*Widow is on her couch; while she is raving to herself, Tattleaid softly brings in the ladies.*]

Widow. Wretched, disconsolate as I am! Oh, welcome, welcome, dear killing anguish! Oh, that I could lie down and die in my present heaviness—but what—how? Nay, my dear, dear lord, why do you look so pale, so ghastly at me? Wottoo, wottoo, fright thy own trembling, shivering wife!

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Tattleuid. Nay, good madam, be comforted.

[*She seems inconsolable, but later the ladies talk scandal and she cannot but join in.*]

1st Lady. But, madam, don't you hear what the town says of the jilt Flirt the men liked so much in the Park? Hark ye—was seen with him in an hackney coach—and silk stockings—key-hole—his wig on the chair. [*Whispers by interruptions.*]

2nd Lady. Impudent Flirt, to be found out!

3rd Lady. But I speak it only to you.

4th Lady. Nor I but to one more. [*Whispers next woman.*]

5th Lady. I can't believe it; nay, I always thought it, madam. [*Whispers the widow.*]

Widow. Sure, 'tis impossible! the demure, prim thing! Sure, the world's hypocrisy. Well, I thank the stars, whatsoever sufferings I have, I've none in reputation. I wonder at the men; I could never think her handsome. She has really a good shape and complexion, but no mien; and no woman has the use of her beauty without mien! Her charms are dumb, they want utterance. But whither does distraction lead me—to talk of charms?

Indeed, it would mean reading quite half the play if one were to quote all those passages which show Steele a delightful humorist of a new kind. But it is only fair to say that there are some pages of moralizing and sentiment which, taken together and the humorous parts excluded, would almost justify Hazlitt's sneer about dramatized sermons.

To illustrate the sentimentality to be found even in this first play of Steele's one more extract must be given. Trusty, the old body-servant of Lord Brumpton, discovers Lord Hardy, the disinherited son, in very decent lodgings, and sentimentalizes over him. The delightful name the

French have given to their own sentimental comedy, *La Comedie Larmoyante*, applies most admirably to scenes of this kind :—

Crusty. Why, my lord, I presume to wait on your lordship. My lord, you're strangely grown ; you're your father's very picture, you're he, my lord ; you are the very man that looked so pleased to see me look so fine in my lace livery, to go to Court. I was his page when he was just such another as you. He kissed me afore a great many lords, and said I was a brave man's son, that taught him to exercise his arms. I remember he carried me to the great window, and bid me be sure to keep in your mother's sight in all my finery. She was the finest young creature ; the maids of honour hated to see her at Court. My lord then courted my good lady. She was as kind to me on her deathbed ; she said to me, Mr. Trusty, take care of my lord's second marriage for that child's sake. She pointed as well as she could to you. You fell a-crying, and said she should not die ; but she did, my lord. She left the world, and no one like her in't. Forgive me, my honoured master. [*Weeps, runs to my lord, and hugs him.*] I've often carried you in these arms that grasp you ; they were stronger then, but if I die to-morrow, you're worth five thousand pounds by my gift—'tis what I've got in the family, and I return it to you with thanks. But alas ! do I live to see you want it ?

This passage won the commendation of Blackmore, himself a would-be reformer of the stage. His *Prince Arthur* (1795) was written before Collier's *Short View*, but was ridiculed on the ground of its want of merit, and made little impression, where Collier effected a revolution.

Steele's next play, *The Lying Lover, or the Ladies' Friendship* (1703), was to be much less witty and amusing and much more sentimental. *The Lying Lover* is the first instance of the Sentimental Comedy in England. Pro-

fessor Ward, in his *History of the English Drama*, gives this reason for the infusion of sentiment with which Steele—on a hint from Cibber, who followed most carefully the taste of a public he thoroughly understood—so liberally dosed this play and his final and very successful play, *The Conscious Lovers*, of which more later. Mr. Ward says :—

The origin of the mistake here committed is to be sought in a distrust of the means by which comedy works, as if they were insufficient for the production of the requisite dramatic effect. Instead of contenting himself with making vice and folly ridiculous, the author applies himself to provoking a response from the emotion of pity. Such a response is not likely to be refused to his kindly and tender touch ; but his resort to an expedient outside the range of the proper resources of comedy announces the approaching virtual extinction of that species in our dramatic literature.

And again :—

Steele, as a dramatist, came to mistake the true means and methods of the comic drama. His own comic genius lacked the sustained vigour which is required by the stage ; and his artistic sense was too keen altogether to have left him unconscious of his inability to satisfy his moral purpose by holding up to ridicule with unflinching persistence those human vices and follies which are the proper subjects of comedy. He therefore called in sentiment to aid humour, availing himself of the reaction against the grosser methods of provoking laughter and amusement which had set in as part of the general reaction against the licence of the Restoration age.

But to return to *The Lying Lover*. It was acted at Drury Lane in December, 1703, and ran for six nights. It was considered a failure, and is certainly a very dull play. Steele said it was ‘damned for its piety,’ and very likely

had it been less decorous it would have pleased the public better ; yet, though this may have been a minor cause, one hopes that the audience objected more to the horrible blank verse passages which crop up unexpectedly when any of the characters feels that he or she can improve the occasion with what a certain class of religious propagandists call 'a few words'. 'A few words' with Steele means something of this kind :—

Lovemore. I can hold out no longer [*throws off disguises*] ; Lovemore still lives to adore your noble friendship, and begs a share in't. Be not amazed ! but let me clasp you both, who in an age as degenerate as this have such transcendent virtue.

Young Bookwit. Oh, Lovemore, Lovemore, how shall I speak my joy at your recovery !

Then, as the occasion demands, in very blank verse :—

I fail beneath the too ecstatic pleasure !
What help has human nature from its sorrows
When our relief itself is such a burden ?

It is horrible to think of a public which would enjoy and applaud this ; but theatrical audiences soon got over their first distaste, and in a very short time would endure no new play which was not ornamented with these curious and unreal moralizings, couched in a language equally artificial and unreal.

The plot of *The Lying Lover* is of little importance, being taken for the most part from Corneille's *Le Menteur*, which was in its turn taken from the *Verdad Sospechosa* of Ruiz de Alarcon. Here it is in brief :—

Latine and Bookwit are undergraduates who have left Oxford without attempting to take any degree. They seem to have a great deal of ready money, indeed Bookwit

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is a perfect Croesus. The play is full of improbabilities. They are discovered in conversation. Bookwit is giving his views on love, and his first remarks excellently exhibit the sentimental nature of the play, and strike the key-note of the kind of drama under discussion.

I can see when the soul is divided by a sparkling tear that twinkles and betrays the heart. A sparkling tear's the livery of love, of love made up of hope and fear, of joy and grief.

His conversation is not, however, by any means confined to this manner of speech, and he is frequently extremely amusing, as in his exposition of love-making, which is far better than his pathology of love. His method is simplicity itself—select your lady and tell her lies which tend to your own self-glorification. This he does with great effect to the Lady Penelope. She is a perfect stranger to him, but, meeting her in the Mall, he renders her some small service and promptly engages her in conversation. He tells her he is a soldier, brags about his valour with so bluff and splendid an air that both the Lady Penelope and her friend the Lady Victoria are greatly impressed. 'I swear he is a very pretty fellow,' says the latter, 'and how readily the thing talks.' Then, to the end of the play, he constantly appears in the most ridiculous light, both to the ladies and to everybody else. Steele, who has usually in his plays (as has been said) a good eye for character, quite failed in the case of Young Bookwit. Even quite insignificant persons are sketched consistently, as for instance Frederick in the present play. But Bookwit, who has been a fellow of wit and good sense, becomes in the middle of the play a mere gorgeous fop and at the end a pathetic declaimer, a hero of melodrama.

He is made to treat Covent Garden Market as a bower

for love-making, appearing there with a band of musicians who play as he directs them by a motion of his hand, in a stirring martial strain while he is telling the lady of his military experiences, and in the soft Lydian mode when he is discoursing of the tender passion. But the ladies have discovered some of his more elaborate romancings to be baseless, and they make fun of him, twit him with falsehood, and leave him; whereat he goes away and gets thoroughly drunk. While in this state he fights a duel with a hated rival, an excellent but jealous fellow—one Lovemore—and leaves him for dead. The watch rush in, arrest every one they can lay their hands on; some of their number presently appear dragging Bookwit; and finally *exeunt omnes* to Newgate prison! Then we come to the ‘strong’ scene of the play. Corneille is put on one side, and we may imagine Steele giving his utmost attention and care to the psychology of remorse. But remorse is no uncommon state of mind in the case of a man who has been very drunk the night before, and the sententious and sentimental nature of Bookwit’s repentant utterances seems (to me at least) not a little disgusting. A short extract from Act V will illustrate this, and (incidentally) exhibit the influence of Shakespeare upon Steele, when the latter wrote in blank verse. This is a purely incidental point, but perhaps not an irrelevancy.

Young Bookwit. How heavily do I awake this morning! Oh, this senseless drinking! To suffer a whole week’s pain for an hour’s jollity! Methinks my senses are burning round me. I have but interrupted hints of the last night. Ha! in a gaol! Oh, I remember, I remember. Oh, Lovemore, Lovemore! I remember—

Latine. You must have patience, and bear it like a man.

Young Bookwit. Oh, whither shall I run to avoid myself? Why all these bars? These bolted iron gates?

They're needless to secure me—Here, here's my rack,
 My gaol, my torture—
 Oh, I can't bear it. I cannot bear the rushing of new
 thoughts;
 Fancy expands my senses to distraction,
 And my soul stretches to that boundless space
 To which I've sent my wretched, wretched friend.
 Oh, Latine! Latine! Is all our mirth and humour come to
 this?

Give me thy bosom, close in thy bosom hide me
 From thy eyes; I cannot bear their pity or reproach.

Latine. Dear Bookwit, how heartily I love you—I don't
 know what to say. But pray have patience.

Young Bookwit. If you can't bear my pain that's but
 communicated by your pity, how shall I my proper inborn
 woe,—my wounded mind?

Latine. In all assaults of fortune that should be serene,
 not in the power of accident or chance—

Young Bookwit. Words! words! all that is but mere talk.
 Perhaps, indeed, to undeserved affliction
 Reason and argument may give relief,
 Or in the known vicissitudes of life
 We may feel comfort by our self-persuasion;
 But oh! there is no taking away guilt:
 This divine particle will ache for ever.
 There is no help but whence I dare not ask;
 When this material organ's indisposed
 Juleps may cool and anodynes give rest;
 But nothing mix with this celestial drop,
 But dew from that high Heaven of which 'tis part.¹

The scene in Newgate has some good humorous matter
 in it. The alchemist, who was really a coiner, and the
 gentleman of high courage and independent spirit whose
 philosophy of life led him to declare war on society, Mr.

¹ There is quite a Shakespearian sound about the whole of this last
 passage, though 'Juleps may cool', &c., is a poor substitute for 'not
 poppy nor mandragora'.

Storm, a highwayman, are very humorously conceived. But there is at all times in the play a most plentiful lack of any sense of dramatic propriety. Long rhetorical speeches, the language of which would pass very well in an Essay, but which appears awkward and involved on the stage; sudden outbursts of that kind of blank verse which occurs (written as prose) in the pathetic passages of Mr. Jerome K. Jerome's books; the superimposition (on a groundwork of frothy foppery, compliment, and farcical unreality) of such scenes as that in which Bookwit's father weeps over his son, who will presently be condemned (as he believes) to the gallows—these are dramatic faults more serious than the mere adhibition of an atmosphere of sincere piety. On the whole it must be confessed the play is dull, rambling, and inartistic.

If Steele could have ended it with the discovery that Lovemore had not really been killed after all, perhaps he might have rung down the curtain, with the audience still unexasperated, but he had the love-plot of the ladies Penelope and Victoria, of Lovemore and Bookwit, to wind up. The agonies of Bookwit's father, when he believes his son to be in danger of losing his life for the homicide, if they are not comedy, have at any rate a certain dramatic force which is wanting elsewhere in the play. The concluding scene represents Lovemore—who has contrived to hide the fact that he is not really dead almost as long as Lord Brumpton—in disguise, with his *fidus Achates* Frederick playing upon the remorse of Penelope. She believes it was due to her coquetry that Lovemore was killed, and laments her former harshness to the quasi-deceased with an exhibition of tragic grief which is rendered ridiculous to a degree by the presence of the quasi-deceased himself. Finally, when her spirit is absolutely broken,

Frederick, the useful Frederick, discloses the deceit, and the erewhile high-spirited Penelope consents to marry Love-more without a word of surprise or any complaint that she should have been cheated into spending the best part of a quarter of an hour in a perfect agony of grief. This is impossible psychology and imbecile comedy. Though this is a bad play artistically, it has an historical importance as being the first instance of the Sentimental Comedy in England. It is necessary to quote one other short extract. This gives us what is probably the best instance of Book-wit's impromptu lying. His father wants him to marry and, to prevent this, he declares he is already married. His father is extremely surprised, and would know the circumstances. He at once plunges into a long story of a secret visit to a lady at Oxford—her father coming upstairs—his own concealment.

Old Bookwit. But she!—

Young Bookwit. She, by general answers, in that case managed it so well that he was going down, when instantly my watch in my pocket struck ten. He turns him short on his amazed daughter, asked where she had it. She cried her cousin Martha sent it out of the country to be mended for her. He said he would take care on't. She comes to me, but, as I was giving it her, the string was so entangled in the cock of a pistol I always had about me on those occasions, that my haste to disengage it fired it off. My mistress swoons away. The father ran out, crying out murder. I thought her dead, feared his return, which he soon did with two boisterous rogues, his sons, and his whole family of servants. I would have made my escape, but they opposed me with drawn swords. I wounded both; but a lusty wench, with a fire-shovel, at one blow struck down my sword, and broke it all to pieces.

Old Bookwit. But still, the poor young lady!

Young Bookwit. Here was I seized. Meantime, Matilda wakes from her trance, beholding me held like a ruffian,

both her brothers bleeding. She was returning to it. What should I do? I saw the hoary head in the divided sorrow, for his sons' lives and daughter's honour, of both which he thought me the invader. She, with pitying, dying and reproaching looks, beseeched me, and taught me what I owed her constant love. I yielded, sir, I own I yielded to the just terror of their family resentment, and to my mistress's more dreadful upbraiding. Thus am I, sir, the martyr of an honest passion.

Old Bookwit. That I most blame is that you concealed it from your best friend. I'll instantly to Penelope's father, and make my apology. He is my friend. [*Exit.*]

Latine. This marriage strangely surprised me.

Young Bookwit. Why, did you believe it, too, as well as the old gentleman? Why, then, I did it excellently. Ha! ha! ha!

It is a great pleasure to turn from *The Lying Lover* to Steele's next play, *The Tender Husband*, or *The Accomplished Fools*. This was produced by Rich in 1705, with the charming Mrs. Oldfield in the part of the heroine. The plot may for the most part, like that of *The Funeral*, be called original, with the exception of a short episode in the fourth Act, which is in part taken from Molière's *Le Sicilien*, or *L'Amour Peintre*. The play is still farce and will not bear any translation into the conditions of real life, but it sparkles everywhere with wit. It is most original and fresh in its treatment of character, and it has that quiet deep humour and idyllic charm which distinguishes *The Vicar of Wakefield*. The plot is cleverly worked out, and the characters are clearly and consistently sketched.

If one may criticize the critics (it is usually done), it must be said that they have made far too little of the individual differences existing between Steele's four plays. I suspect that those who wrote the accounts of Steele which

I read before writing this paper, had not all read either *The Lying Lover* or *The Tender Husband*. It is usual to say of Steele's plays as a whole that they are dull, and more like sermons than plays. But *The Tender Husband* has hardly any moralizing in it, and is quite as amusing as either of Goldsmith's two plays. Tony Lumpkin, in *She Stoops to Conquer*, has his prototype in Steele's play, and, as will be noticed in the account of the plot, Sheridan and Fielding both owe something to Steele in the parts of Lydia Languish and Squire Western. Too little is made of the fact that Steele's *Funeral*—in the first four Acts at least—and his *Tender Husband* are written in the vein of 'harmless amusement' in which he excelled, while *The Lying Lover* and *The Conscious Lovers* are plays written from the point of view of the lay-preacher in what I have ventured to call his didactic style. There is, if one must confess it, just a little of that horrid thing the revivalist in Steele. He is too like his own Mr. Bookwit, normally an amusing expansive good fellow, but a moralist to be shunned when he is crapulous. *The Tender Husband*, however, is, as we have said, written almost entirely in Steele's happier vein.

This is the plot of it. Captain Clerimont, the usual gentlemanly adventurer of the seventeenth and early eighteenth century comedy, is anxious to marry a fortune, and he acquaints his good friend Mr. Pounce, a rascally but wholly delightful lawyer, that Mistress Biddy Tipkin, the daughter of the rich banker Hezekiah Tipkin of Lombard Street, seems to him a most desirable match. Here is a short extract from the conversation of Pounce and Clerimont on this important matter:—

Pounce. To my knowledge, ten thousand pounds in money.

Clerimont. Such a stature, such a blooming countenance, so easy a shape !

Pounce. In jewels of her grandmother's, five thousand.

Cler. Her wit so lively, her mien so alluring !

Pounce. In land, a thousand a year.

Cler. Her lips have that certain prominence, that swelling softness, that they invite to a pressure ; her eyes that languish, that they give pain, though they look only inclined to rest ; her whole person that one charm—

Pounce. [*professionally*] Raptures ! raptures !

Cler. How can it, so insensibly to itself, lead us through cares it knows not, through such a wilderness of hopes, fears, joys, sorrows, desires, despairs, ecstasies and torments, with so sweet, yet so anxious vicissitude !

Pounce. Why, I thought you had never seen her ?

Cler. No more I ha'n't.

Pounce. Who told you then of her inviting lips, her soft sleepy eyes ?

Cler. You yourself.

Pounce. Sure, you rave, I never spoke of her afore to you.

Cler. Why, you won't face me down. Did you not just now say she had ten thousand pounds in money, five in jewels, and a thousand a year ?

Pounce. I confess my own stupidity and her charms. Why, if you were to meet, you would certainly please her, *you have the cant of loving.*

And later :—

Well then, since we may be free, you must understand, the young lady, by being kept from the world, has made a world of her own. She has spent all her solitude in reading romances, her head is full of shepherds, knights, flowery meads, groves, and streams, so that if you talk like a man of this world to her, you do nothing.

Cler. Oh, let me alone, I have been a great traveller in fairy-land myself. I know *Oroondates* ; *Cassandra*, *Astraea*, and *Clelia*¹ are my intimate acquaintance.

¹ *Astrea* was a French romance by Honoré d'Urfé ; *Clelia* was by M^{me} de Scudéry (d. 1701) ; *Cassandra* by Gautier de Costes, Seigneur de Calprenède.

Mr. Pounce, stimulated by a bribe of a thousand pounds, is quite willing to use his influence with the banker for furthering the match, but unfortunately a country booby Humphry Gubbin, whom we have mentioned as the prototype of Tony Lumpkin, is about to be married to the lady perforce at the instance of his father, Sir Harry Gubbin, whose character in its main features reappears in Fielding's *Squire Western*. Here is a short scene in which Sir Harry makes his proposals to Biddy Tipkin's father the banker, a heavy man with a turn for portentous commonplace in his conversation.

Sir Harry Gubbin. Look ye, brother Tipkin, as I told you before, my business in town is to dispose of a hundred head of cattle, and my son.

Tipkin. Brother Gubbin, as I signified to you in my last, bearing date September 13th, my niece has a thousand pounds per annum, and because I have found you a plain-dealing man (particularly in the easy pad you put into my hands last summer), I was willing you should have the refusal of my niece, provided that I have a discharge from all retrospects while her guardian, and one thousand pounds for my care.

Sir Harry. Aye, but brother, you rate her too high, the war has fetched down the price of women; the whole nation is overrun with petticoats; our daughters lie upon our hands, Brother Tipkin; girls are drugs, sir, mere drugs.

Tipkin. Look ye, Sir Harry, let girls be what they will, a thousand pounds a year is a thousand pounds a year; and a thousand pounds a year is neither girl nor boy.

Sir Harry. Look ye, Mr. Tipkin, the main article with me is, that foundation of wife's rebellion, and husband's cuckoldom, that cursed pin-money. Five hundred pounds per annum pin-money!

Tipkin. The word pin-money, Sir Harry, is a term!

But there are difficulties in the way. Humphry Gubbin, though too much afraid of his father's crab-tree

cudgel to say so, is secretly disinclined to marry his cousin, while a short extract from a conversation between Mistress Tipkin and her aunt on the subject of the proposed match will give us some idea of the favour with which that excessively romantic little person regarded her booby-swain.

Aunt. Come, niece, come; you don't do well to make sport with your relations, especially with a young gentleman that has so much kindness for you.

Niece. Kindness for me! What a phrase is there to express the darts and flames, the sighs and languishings, of an expecting lover!

Aunt. Pray, niece, forbear this idle trash, and talk like other people. Your cousin Humphry will be true and hearty in what he says, and that's a great deal better than the talk and compliment of romances.

Niece. Good madam, don't wound my ears with such expressions; do you think I can ever love a man that's *true* and *hearty*? What a peasant-like amour do these coarse words import! True and hearty! Pray, aunt, endeavour a little at the embellishment of your style.

Aunt. Alack-a-day, cousin Biddy, these idle romances have quite turned your head.

Niece. How often must I desire you, madam, to lay aside that familiar name, cousin Biddy? I never hear it without blushing. Did you ever meet with a heroine in those idle romances, as you call 'em, that was termed Biddy?

Aunt. Ah! cousin, cousin, these are mere vapours, indeed; nothing but vapours.

Niece. No, the heroine has always something soft and engaging in her name; something that gives us a notion of the sweetness of her beauty and behaviour; a name that glides through half a dozen tender syllables as Elismonda, Clidamira, Deidamia, that runs upon vowels off the tongue; not hissing through one's teeth, or breaking them with consonants. 'Tis strange rudeness those familiar names they give us, when there is Aurelia, Sacharissa, Gloriana, for people of condition, and Celia, Chloris, Corinna, Mopsa, for their maids and those of lower rank.

Aunt. Look ye, Biddy, this is not to be supported. I know not where you learned this nicety ; but I can tell you, forsooth, as much as you despise it, your mother was a Bridget afore you, and an excellent housewife.

Niece. Good madam, don't upbraid me with my mother Bridget, and an excellent housewife.

Aunt. Yes, I say she was ; and spent her time in better learning than you ever did—not in reading of fights and battles of dwarfs and giants, but in writing out receipts for broths, possets, caudles, and surfeit-waters, as became a good country gentlewoman.

Niece. My mother, and a Bridget !

Aunt. Yes, niece, I say again, your mother, my sister, was a Bridget ! the daughter of her mother Margery, of her mother Sisly, of her mother Alice.

Niece. Have you no mercy ? Oh, the barbarous genealogy !

Aunt. Of her mother Winifred, of her mother Joan.

Niece. Since you will run on, then I must needs tell you I am not satisfied in the point of my nativity. Many an infant has been placed in a cottage with obscure parents, till by chance some ancient servant of the family has known it by its marks.

Aunt. Aye, you had best be searched. That's like your calling the winds the fanning gales, before I don't know how much company ; and the tree that was blown by it had, forsooth, a spirit imprisoned in the trunk of it.

And later :—

Niece. Live comfortably ! What kind of life is that ? A great heiress live comfortably ! Pray, aunt, learn to raise your ideas. What is, I wonder, to live comfortably ?

Aunt. To live comfortably is to live with prudence and frugality, as we do in Lombard Street.

Niece. As we do ! That's a fine life, indeed, with one servant of each sex. Let's see how many things our coachman is good for. He rubs down his horses, lays the cloth, whets the knives, and sometimes makes beds.

Aunt. A good servant should turn his hand to everything in a family.

Niece. Nay, there's not a creature in our family that has not two or three different duties. As John is butler, footman, and coachman, so Mary is cook, laundress, and chambermaid.

Aunt. Well, and do you laugh at that?

Niece. No, not I; nor at the coach-horses, though one has an easy trot for my uncle's riding, and t'other an easy pace for your side-saddle.

Aunt. And so you jeer at the good management of your relations, do you?

Niece. No, I'm well satisfied that all the house are creatures of business; but, indeed, was in hopes that my poor little lapdog might have lived with me upon my fortune without an employment; but my uncle threatens every day to make him a turnspit, that he too, in his sphere, may help us to live comfortably.

Aunt. Hark ye, cousin Biddy.

Niece. I vow I'm out of countenance when our butler, with his careful face, drives us all stowed in a chariot drawn by one horse ambling and t'other trotting, with his provisions behind for the family, from Saturday night till Monday morning, bound for Hackney—then we make a comfortable figure, indeed.

Aunt. So we do, and so will you always, if you marry your cousin Humphry.

Niece. Name not the creature.

Later in the play she makes fun of Gubbin in a very characteristic way :—

Niece. Sir, your person and address bring to my mind the whole history of Valentine and Orson. What, would they marry me to a wild man? Pray answer me a question or two.

Humphry. Aye, aye; as many as you please, cousin Bridget.

Niece. What wood were you taken in? How long have you been caught?

Humphry. Caught!

Niece. Where were your haunts?

Humphry. My haunts!

Niece. Are not clothes very uneasy to you? Is this strange dress the first you ever wore?

Humphry. How?

Niece. Are you not a great admirer of roots, and raw flesh? Let me look upon your nails. Don't you love blackberries, haws, and pig-nuts, mightily?

Humphry. How?

Niece. Canst thou deny that thou wert suckled by a wolf? You have not been so barbarous, I hope, since you came among men, as to hunt your nurse, have you?

The part of Biddy Tipkin seems to me to be infinitely better than any other in Steele, just as *The Tender Husband* is by far the best play. Congreve himself could hardly have improved the graceful easiness of writing which characterizes many of Biddy's speeches.

Biddy is romance-struck, as imaginative people are sometimes stage-struck, and is of course the subject of every one's laughter, yet one feels instinctively that this hyper-romanticism is only a phase, one admires the wit with which she defends herself against the common-sense and commonplace people who surround her; and these very people, with their view of life quite as laughable and much less picturesque, make her the more attractive by contrast.

To continue the story of the plot. While her aunt is urging Biddy to accept Humphry Gubbin, the diplomatic and interested Mr. Pounce comes up with Clerimont, introduces the Captain, and then walks off with the aunt to talk to her about her investments. The romantic figure of the Captain (who has had the forethought to put his arm into a sling), and his magnificently poetical observations upon the 'gloomy shades' about them (they were in St. James's Park), completely engage Biddy's affections at first sight.

Finally Clerimont contrives to carry off Biddy, coming to the house disguised as a painter on the very day fixed for the marriage of Biddy and Gubbin.

This device of Clerimont's disguise, though it seems to be borrowed from Molière's *Le Sicilien*, yet gives occasion for some very telling and amusing light satire on painters and their methods.

The sub-plot introduces us to Clerimont's brother, who, as his wife seems too ready to listen to her numerous would-be lovers, dresses a former flame of his (Mrs. Fainlove) as a man. 'I don't design you', says he, 'to personate a real man, you are only to be a pretty gentleman,' and instructs her in this disguise to make violent love to his lady. Eventually he surprises them together. The lady weeps and swears repentance. Clerimont cannot bear to see her in tears, and they are reconciled with kisses. The Lay Preacher has a word to say on Marriage, but says it briefly and pointedly, and we may suppose Mr. and Mrs. Clerimont, sen. live happily ever after. Which brings us to the end of the play, for Mr. Pounce, with a trifling exertion of his famous strategy and tact, promptly marries the discarded Mrs. Fainlove to Humphry Gubbin, to the great joy of both. The 'heavy fathers,' Mr. Tipkin and Mr. Gubbin, rage immoderately, but of course are finally brought to see that nothing they can do will alter the case. Biddy is married to Clerimont, Gubbin to Mrs. Fainlove, Mr. Clerimont, sen. practically re-married to Mrs. Clerimont, and the effect of these six delightful people, immoderately pleased with themselves and the world, is too much even for a heavy father, so a romping dance concludes the whole, as in the Otway-Molière *Cheats of Scapin*.

It is a delightful play. True, no philosophy of life can be derived from it ; it is, one must confess, more farce than

comedy, but it is perpetually witty. Steele is at his best in it, and exhibits a great advance upon his former dramatic style; the heavy periods are gone, and an easy colloquial style of unforced witty writing has taken their place. The plot cannot properly be called a Sentimental Comedy.

One wishes Steele had ended his dramatic work here. But he did not. His next play—*The Conscious Lovers*—was produced many years later, in fact not till 1722. Its original title, according to Professor Ward, seems to have been *The Unfashionable Lovers*. It is sentimental to a degree, ill-constructed, undramatic, and in its incidents as farcical as Farquhar. Indeed, the latter's preposterous disguises, 'Clincher senior disguised in a blanket', 'Old Mirabel disguised as a Spaniard', and so forth, which Farquhar's boisterous high spirits and ready invention make possible, have their counterparts in Steele's play, which was obviously intended to be a kind of sententious high comedy. If Steele had introduced a Clincher senior disguised in a blanket, as he was quite capable of doing at the time he wrote *The Conscious Lovers*, a young Clincher, son to Clincher senior, would have turned to his *fidus Achates* and said gravely: 'Indisputably, Tom, respect is a father's due, even though he appeared in the costume our father Adam wore in the lovely bowers of Eden.' And the thought of Mr. Collier's attack on Congreve's use of the name Jehu for a hackney coachman would then have led him to the suppression of 'our father Adam'.

It is extremely difficult to take this play seriously; parts of it might have been written by Mr. Barlow, the preceptor of Sandford and Merton. The words of Sir John Bevil at the conclusion of the play are typical of it:

Now, ladies and gentlemen, you have set the world

a fair example ; your happiness is owing to your constancy and merit ; and the several difficulties you have struggled with evidently show

Whate'er the generous mind itself denies,
The secret care of Providence supplies.

This it is

to refine the age,
To chasten wit and moralize the stage,
to quote the prologue of the play. Postulate an impossible plot, impossible characters, and from these the writer of comedy conceives it his mission to justify the ways of God to man !

The plot is taken in part from the *Andria* of Terence. The play was well cast, with Booth and Mrs. Oldfield in the principal parts. It was put on the stage with new scenery and new dresses : it ran for eighteen nights, was a great success, and was often revived up to the year 1760. It was dedicated to King William III, with an evidently sincere panegyric of that splendid man, interesting from its allusion to the king's unpopularity with the general mass of the people. The plot is as follows :—

Sir John Bevil, a model father, has arranged for the marriage of a model son, young Bevil, with a young lady of great beauty and virtue, her name Lucinda, daughter to old Sealand, a fabulously rich India merchant. But this lady is in love with, and beloved by, Mr. Myrtle, Bevil's greatest friend, therefore Bevil (confident that he will be rejected !) agrees to his father's proposals. He will so be able to obey his excellent father (at no expense to himself), and it is the mark of an excellent young man to obey his father. So he argues to himself with absolute gravity, after calming his spirits for the vicissitudes of the day with a thoughtful reading of 'this charming vision of Mirza ¹' :

¹ By his friend Addison.

it never occurs to him that there is anything ridiculous in this scheme, which he describes as what he is 'not very good at, though it is an honest dissimulation'. The amount of virtual lying into which this leads him is horrid to contemplate in the case of so superior a being. For he is literally constructed as a model, a pattern of filial duty. He is as perfect as Sir Charles Grandison. Here is a short extract from the play, which gives us a glimpse of Bevil and his father. Bevil, it should be said, has immense wealth derived from a legacy from his mother. He is not in any way dependent on his father.

Tom. Sir John Bevil, sir, is in the next room.

Bevil Jun. Duncie! Why did not you bring him in?

Tom. I told him, sir, you were in your closet.

Bevil Jun. I thought you had known, sir, it was my duty to see my father anywhere. [*Going himself to the door.*]

Tom. The devil's in my master! he has always more wit than I have. [*Aside.*]

BEVIL JUN. *introducing* SIR JOHN.

Bevil Jun. Sir, you are the most gallant, the most complaisant of all parents. Sure 'tis not a compliment to say these lodgings are yours. Why would you not walk in, sir?

Sir John Bevil. I was loth to interrupt you unseasonably on your wedding-day.

Bevil Jun. One to whom I am beholden for my birthday might have used less ceremony.

Sir John Bevil. But, dear Jack, are you in earnest in all this? And will you really marry her?

Bevil Jun. Did I ever disobey any command of yours, sir? nay, any inclination that I saw you bent upon?

[Observe the equivocation.]

Sir John Bevil. Why, I can't say you have, son; but methinks in this whole business, you have not been so warm as I could have wished you. You have visited her, it's true, but you have not been particular. Every one

knows you can say and do as handsome things as any man ; but you have done nothing but loved in the general—been complaisant only.

Bevil Jun. As I am ever prepared to marry if you bid me, so I am ready to let it alone if you will have me.

Sir John Bevil, however, although his son appears so perfectly ready to comply with his wishes, meets elsewhere with an unexpected obstacle. Sealand suddenly declares that young Bevil is not of sufficiently good moral character to marry his daughter. Sir John is astounded, as well he might be. But Sealand is firm. Bevil, he says, is paying large sums of money to some woman who cannot but be his mistress. In reality the lady in question, our heroine the fair Indiana, is a distressed damsel whose romantic story, a tale of many hardships endured on land and sea, Bevil tells at length in confidence to his father's trusty body-servant, our old friend Trusty of *The Funeral*, reincarnated under the name of Humphry. This lady, robbed as she has been of all her small fortune, would have been without the means of life but for the chivalrous conduct of Mr. Bevil, who rescued her from the clutches of the man who had not only stolen her money, but was actually dragging her through the streets to prison. Bevil then, it appears, made a secret composition with this fellow to let her go, brought her to England (she had been before in France), and supported her in luxury, giving as his reason, when she questioned him indirectly on the point, that some men who did not care for wine, or sports, or the Arts, were yet connoisseurs in distressed beauty. This scene is typical, and as well worth quoting as any :

Indiana. My aunt would needs have it that no man ever does any extraordinary kindness or service for a woman, but for his own sake.

Bevil. Well, madam ! Indeed I can't but be of her mind.

Indiana. What, though he should maintain and support her, without demanding anything of her, on her part?

Bevil. Why, madam, is making an expense in the service of a valuable woman (for such I must suppose her), though she should never do him any favour, nay, though she should never know who did her such service, such a mighty heroic business?

Indiana. Certainly! I should think he must be a man of an uncommon mould.

Bevil. Dear madam, why so? 'tis but, at best, a better taste in expense. To bestow upon one, whom he may think one of the ornaments of the whole creation, to be conscious, that from his superfluity, an innocent, a virtuous spirit is supported above the temptations and sorrows of life! That he sees satisfaction, health and gladness in her countenance, while he enjoys the happiness of seeing her (as that I will suppose too, or he must be too abstracted, too insensible), I say, if he is allowed to delight in that prospect; alas, what mighty matter is there in all this?

Indiana. No mighty matter in so disinterested a friendship!

Bevil. Disinterested! I can't think him so; your hero, madam, is no more than what every gentleman ought to be, and I believe very many are. He is only one who takes more delight in reflections than in sensations. He is more pleased with thinking than eating; that's the utmost you can say of him. Why, madam, a greater expense than all this, men lay out upon an unnecessary stable of horses.

Indiana. Can you be sincere in what you say?

Bevil. You may depend upon it, if you know any such man, he does not love dogs inordinately.

Indiana. No, that he does not.

Bevil. Nor cards, nor dice.

Indiana. No.

Bevil. Nor bottle companions.

Indiana. No.

Bevil. Nor loose women.

Indiana. No, I'm sure he does not.

Bevil. Take my word then, if your admired hero is not liable to any of these kind of demands, there's no such pre-

eminence in this as you imagine. Nay, this way of expense you speak of is what exalts and raises him that has a taste for it; and, at the same time, his delight is incapable of satiety, disgust, or penitence.

Here, perhaps, we have Bevil at his best. He has, with all his priggishness, a philosophic placidity about him, something of that quiet self-satisfaction which is the goal most philosophers aim at, both pagan and Christian. There is just a suggestion of Miss Austen's admirable D'Arcy about him. But for Indiana, the heroine, what can be said for her? She accepts without protest most lavish presents, besides an extremely comfortable and well-appointed house, from Bevil, hoping that he intends to marry her, and of course confident that his motives are above suspicion. It is a question of taste, but she seems to us a little wanting in self-respect. She expostulates with her aunt, who imputes motives of interest. 'If he is an ill man, let us look into his stratagems. Here is another of them [*showing letter*]. Here's two hundred and fifty pounds in bank-notes with these words: "To pay for the set of dressing plate which will be brought home to-morrow."' And the aunt not unreasonably remains unconvinced.

Eventually, to cut a ridiculous plot as short as possible, Mr. Sealand discovers that Indiana is his long-lost daughter. Lucinda marries Bevil's friend Myrtle, who has been twice disguised in the course of the action, once personating an old lawyer, and once the rich old uncle of one of the other characters. Indiana of course marries Bevil, and the two characters of the sub-plot, Tom and Phyllis, valet to Bevil and maid to Lucinda respectively, marry also, as we are led to suppose.

There are some speeches in the last Act so supremely foolish that they are perhaps unsurpassed even in the later

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golden age of Sentimental Comedy. Consider only this dialogue, immediately subsequent to Sealand's discovery that Indiana is his daughter:—

Isabella. If yet there wants an explanation of your wonder, examine well this face (yours, sir, I well remember), gaze on and read in me your sister, Isabella.

Mr. Sealand. My sister!

Isabella. But here's a claim more tender yet—your Indiana, sir, your long-lost daughter.

Mr. Sealand. Oh, my child! my child!

Indiana. All gracious Heaven! is it possible! do I embrace my father?

Mr. Sealand. And I do hold thee.—These passions are too strong for utterance. Rise, rise, my child, and give my tears their way.—Oh, my sister! [*embraces her.*]

Isabella. Now, dearest niece, my groundless fear, my painful cares no more shall vex thee. If I have wronged thy noble lover with too much suspicion, my just concern for thee, I hope, will plead my pardon.

Mr. Sealand. Oh! make him, then, the full amends, and be yourself the messenger of joy. Fly this instant! tell him all these wondrous turns of Providence in his favour. . . . Oh, my child! how are our sorrows past o'er-paid by such a meeting! Though I have lost so many years of soft paternal dalliance with thee, yet, in one day to find thee thus, and thus bestow thee, in such perfect happiness, is ample, ample reparation! And yet again, the merit of thy lover—

Indiana. Oh! had I spirits left to tell you of his actions! how strongly filial duty has suppressed his love; and how concealment still has doubled all his obligations; the pride, the joy of his alliance, sir, would warm your heart, as he has conquered mine.

Mr. Sealand. How laudable is love when born of virtue! I burn to embrace him.

Or again, let us consider, before we take leave of Steele's contributions to the Sentimental Comedy, this passage in

which, earlier in the play, Indiana justifies Bevil's support of her to the indignant Mr. Sealand :

Indiana. If you say this from what you think of me, you wrong yourself and him. Let not me, miserable though I may be, do injury to my benefactor. No, sir, my treatment ought rather to reconcile you to his virtues. If to bestow without a prospect of return ; if to delight in supporting what might, perhaps, be thought an object of desire, with no other view than to be her guard against those who would not be so disinterested ; if these actions, sir, can in a careful parent's eye commend him to a daughter, give yours, sir, give her to my honest, generous Bevil. What have I to do but sigh, and weep, and rave, run wild, a lunatic in chains, or, hid in darkness, mutter in distracted starts and broken accents my strange, strange story !

Against these we should set the scene in which Bevil refuses to fight a duel with his mistakenly jealous friend Myrtle. The scene is too long for quotation.

The Conscious Lovers gave rise to a considerable amount of discussion. Dennis wrote two pamphlets attacking it, and there were several written in defence.¹ It is noteworthy, in passing, that the play contains one curiously gross character, Cimberton, a coxcomb, who wants to marry Lucinda for her fortune. Cimberton's observations on marriage and on the person of the lady he intends to marry strike a false note in the piece. They were afterwards to some extent bowdlerized, but their introduction at all shows that Steele had not quite thrown off the yoke of Restoration comedy.

Besides *The Funeral*, *The Lying Lover*, *The Tender Husband*, and *The Conscious Lovers*, Steele wrote four Acts of a play to be called *The School of Action*. The piece, so far as it goes, is farcical to a degree, but by no means unamusing. It deals with two gentlemen who have the lease of a theatre,

¹ A synopsis of Dennis's first attack is given by Mr. Aitken in his preface to the Mermaid Edition of Steele's plays.

and a device of one of them, which consists in making the crabbed guardian of a young lady with whom he is in love put up, with his wife, in the theatre, imagining it to be an inn, and then frightening them with theatrical ghosts into giving back some misappropriated money. There is some fun, in Steele's best vein, when the two lessees examine the capability of various applicants for positions 'on the boards'. There is, for instance, a tragedian who cannot and will not recite some bombastic stuff which he has by heart unless he wears a long robe, has a truncheon to wave, and makes an entry to the sound of military music. They strip him of this outward show, and the poor man stops short in his 'Clidamira oh! oh! oh!' with a groan and confesses his inability 'to follow either love or war without some equipage.'

Steele has also left a part of an Act of a comedy or farce to be called *The Gentleman*, dealing with high life below stairs. It looks as if it would have been more amusing than the Townley-Garrick play of that name, which certainly owes its main idea to Steele's fragment and his paper—No. 88—in *The Spectator*. Neither *The School of Action* nor *The Gentleman* seems likely to have developed into a regular sentimental comedy of the type of *The Conscious Lovers*. Of this last play Professor Ward says: 'With it English comedy sank into the tearful embrace of artificiality and weakness from which it has never again altogether torn itself away.'

As this paper is intended to deal with the Sentimental Comedy as well as with Steele's share in it, it seems necessary to mention some names which were thought famous in its later development. The most successful sentimental play in Garrick's age was Moore's *The Gamester*, written specially for Garrick. Of *The Gamester* Mr. Birrell

has said, in his *Obiter Dicta*, that it was the kind which makes an actor's reputation. There was nothing in it but what Garrick was responsible for. Moore died in 1757. Arthur Murphy (1727-1801), Whitehead (1714-85) with his *School for Lovers*, and Hugh Kelly (1714-85, *False Delicacy*, &c.) handed on the feeble lamp, and pleased their contemporaries. The most successful efforts of the elder George Coleman (1733-94) had in them something of the spirit of genuine comedy. Such, for instance, are his *Jealous Wife* and *The Clandestine Marriage*, written in collaboration with Garrick. General Burgoyne (died 1792) has something of the style of Sheridan, but is of course without his brilliancy. Neither Goldsmith himself nor even Sheridan is altogether free from the insincere sentiment of the school they despised.

The last conspicuous figure of the Sentimental Comedy is Richard Cumberland (1732-1811), a dealer in sentimental morality and comic characters who talk in dialects. Cumberland has a laudable seriousness of aim. He thought, he tells us, to do something to consolidate the different races of which our Empire is composed, by putting on the stage old Scotch servants (who talk indifferent Scotch but have very good hearts), comic Irishmen, Welshmen, and so forth. This, perhaps, gives one an insight into his sense of what is humorous. He had a treacherous memory, which led him to imagine that he was writing original matter when he was really drawing upon a reminiscence of some one else's work that he had either seen or read. He is the Sir Fretful Plagiary of Sheridan's *Critic*. The Sentimental Comedy did not end with Cumberland. It is still a stock commodity of our stage managers. But after Cumberland's time it ceased to maintain its former undisputed place in the Public's favour. With Cumberland, then, we may conclude our history.



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